Public comments by Lindy Weilgart, Ph.D.
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In reference to Michael Stocker's comments, I too hope we have evolved sufficiently not to focus entirely on the costs of mitigation without factoring in the costs of environmental degradation, loss of species, quality of life, and health of our world.

As I was hearing about the NRC's Marine Mammal Populations and Noise report, I was reminded of the image of the Wizard of Oz's man behind the screen. INPUT required for this elaborate and wonderful scheme is almost entirely absent and will be for the foreseeable future, which is acknowledged in the report. But if the state of knowledge is bad and Doug Wartzok admits that we don't have enough information to address the question of biological significance of noise disturbance reactions, why does he feel it is legitimate to delve into policy where mistakes can affect REAL animals rather just be confined to scientific disputes in academia? One could have honestly acknowledged that marine mammal science isn't going to provide the necessary answers over the short-term, and if you want to delve into policy, then look at mitigation instead, like technological developments (quieting technologies), area and seasonal closures, etc., as an immediate measure in the meantime. That would be more precautionary in my opinion.

The statement that there are no population declines in marine mammals due to noise is scientifically indefensible without also saying that significant population declines in most cetaceans are undetectable unless very severe indeed, and that it would be very difficult to isolate noise as the only threat causing those declines WERE they detectable. So, it is a perfectly meaningless sentence. I think that we'll find that the more we look, the more we'll be surprised at how subtle visible observable effects translate into something like decreased reproductive success. These sorts of statements really reduce the confidence and credibility of the NRC panel process.

This problem also highlights the notion of viewing science as simply characterizing facts, that it is accurate, unbiased, and objective, which is, I'm sorry to say, a myth. We should strive for that, but scientific evidence of bias is overwhelming and thus simply educating the public is not straightforward. We as scientists need to come to terms with this fact. There is much in science that is open to legitimate debate and that debate should be encouraged. To say, as has been claimed here, that it is UNSCIENTIFIC of the public to extrapolate from mid-frequency sonars to other sonars is false, in my opinion. It IS perfectly valid and sensible, in a precautionary way, to be concerned about other sonars until such time as can be proven that the MANY overlapping characteristics between mid-frequency sonars and other sonars are NOT the damaging characteristics. So the public does NOT need to be more educated—it has a scientifically valid, logical point.

In general, in this Committee, I am struck that my colleagues, the researchers, in particular, seem to be out of touch with the public. This Committee seems like a cocoon at times. The public, as can be seen from the comments that are passed out, is generally unwilling to embrace the overwhelming importance of science to the potential detriment of marine mammals. Comments made yesterday seem to assume that the public is so enamored of the benefits of science to the point of placing whales at risk. Scientific research DOES need to be regulated, even marine mammal research, if it adds to yet more noise to marine mammals and also when it targets whales specifically. Fingerpointing about who is more the target of regulation is not very helpful. Benign research, like photo I.D.'s, that benefits whales, however, SHOULD be vastly easier on the applicant, though, to encourage science without detriment to the whales.